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Extend the Ban on Censorship

Now that Congress's ban on the Administration's heavy-handed secrecy program is about to expire, the White House is making conciliatory noises to head off any extension. Congress ought not to take the bait.

President Reagan decreed a year ago that some extraordinary secrecy measures previously used only by the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency be extended to thousands of other Government employees. They were to be required to promise for the rest of their lives to submit any writings about national security to Government censors. They were also required to submit to random polygraph tests.

The order caused a storm of protest. Critics argued that the Administration had overreacted to only a few annoying but hardly threatening leaks of information. Congress quickly agreed that the order might actually damage the nation. It could hurt

morale and also inhibit desirable criticism and analysis of foreign policy by former officials.

The Administration finally retreated last month and suspended its decree. Now Robert McFarlane, the President's national security adviser, offers voluntarily to extend the freeze through the current session of Congress and to take no further action without 90 days' advance notice.

But his letter displays an Administration unchastened by Congress's profound skepticism. "This is a serious problem that won't go away," he insists, "and we therefore cannot completely foreclose future action ... if a legislative solution to unauthorized disclosures is not found."

The serious problem that "won't go away" is excessive Government secrecy. And for that the proper legislative solution is renewal of the law requiring the executive to desist unless it can make a stronger case for these ugly restraints.

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